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THE SINNERS OF GRAHAM GREENE

AN ENGLISH AUTHOR ONCE DESCRIBED a quaint method he had of wooing sleep whenever he was troubled by insomnia. It was simply to try to decide for himself with which saint he would prefer to spend the evening in conversation. Invariably his litany of saints would narrow down to the saint of sinners, Augustine, and this result was repeated when he experimented on others. Most insomniacs would prefer to converse through the night with St. Augustine simply because Augustine was a sinner and a sinner is a most interesting conversationalist.

The interest we have in Augustine, the sinner, is the same interest that Graham Green has in Scobie, in Sarah Miles, and in Maurice. In fact Professor von Hildebrand says in his *True Morality and its Counterparts* that Greene's novels are characterized by an absorbing preoccupation with sin and the sinner; especially with the sinner who assumes the role of the hero. The virtuous man is presented more or less as the negative counterpart of the sinner, "self-righteous, pharisaic, mediocre, or at least unamiable."

Not only does Greene make the virtuous an unpleasant lot to associate with, but, according to Mary McCarthy, in Greene's works the most virtuous being of all, God Himself, becomes

less like air in the lungs than like a depressing smog that hangs over a modern industrial city. He permeates the novels and plays with His unfailing presence, and in turn, He soaks up the smells of His surroundings—bad cooking, and mildew, and dirty sheets and stale alcohol. You would not think that this was well calculated to make religion attractive to the general public. But the public is titillated by this deity, created in its own bored image. Religion, for non-believers (and almost everyone, at bottom, is a non-believer), has become the new pornography. If Graham Greene's works, in the aggregate, are tiresome, for all their gift of suspense, and "leave a bad taste in the mouth," this does not detract from their appeal, for pornography has always been tiresome, while catering to an appetite for novelty; it cannot escape this fate.

Now admirers of Greene may disagree mildly or violently with these judgments of von Hildebrand and Mary McCarthy, and I would go along with those who consider that Miss McCarthy has overdrawn the characterization of God in Greene's novels and plays. Nevertheless, the sinner is of primary concern for him, and the sinner's struggles for sanctity are of first interest. The sinner seems to love more intensely than the pseudo-righteous, the pharisaical and cynical, and for Greene's characters it is more important to love than merely to adhere to what others would refer to as God's law. The position seems to be taken that there are many *juridically righteous* persons who do not love, and that it is not difficult to infer that the true substance of Catholic living is love and not the mere performance of external acts of piety.

At times even the most discriminating reader of Greene feels that the novelist is more concerned with showing the dichotomy between love and the mere observance of law than with attempting to reconcile the two. It is not surprising, then, if the sinner who loves more intensely becomes the protagonist of the novel and the righteous or mere observer of law becomes the antagonist. Nevertheless it is precisely here that we are confronted with fundamental issues that are theological and philosophical. Greene's gimlet eyes penetrate into the human soul and discern recesses of the soul that appear to be closed to other eyes. His mastery is in the area where problems converge, and where do problems converge more acutely than in the mystery of sin?

In an article by Herbert A. Kenny, "Graham Greene" (*Catholic World*, August, 1957), Greene is called the "connoisseur of conflict." It might also be said that the conflicts Greene discovers between sinner and self-righteous, between reason and faith, between nature and supernature, between human folly and grace, stimulate all sorts of questions for the philosopher-theologian. We shall consider a few of these issues as they are raised by Greene and let others decide whether they contribute anything to the discussion of Greene as unavoidably a philosopher-theologian in his own right.

Professor A. E. Taylor in his Gifford Lectures (*Faith of a Moralist*) characterizes sin as a psychologico-moral experience which is self-condemnatory, indelible, and incommunicable. It is an experience that cannot be destroyed and cannot be vicariously experienced by another. It is this experience that Greene clinically analyzes, and his analysis is one of the sharpest of any literary master. Greene's characters are poignantly aware of the self-condemnatory, indelible, and incommunicable features of guilt and sin. F. H. Bradley, the Idealist, saw the deepest reaches of personality expressed in the psychologico-moral state of self-condemnation.

Greene's Scobie and Sarah, his Father Callifer and Maurice, never seem to destroy this self-condemnation in their own experience, and to this extent they seem to testify to the presence of a disvalue in themselves that must and yet cannot be removed. Despite this experience of tragic self-condemnation, there appears to be a groping for some expression of love in the very midst of this self-hate.

The paradox might be put this way (Greene's insight into the experience of the mystery of sin brings this paradoxical principle to the surface of his characters' lives): *God is psychologically most proximate when theologically He is most remote*. Let us explain what this means. Theologians tell us that grave sin consists in the privation of sanctifying grace, privation which in the event of the death of the sinner would bring the punishments of the pain of sense and the pain of loss (*poenae sensus* and *damni*). While he is in such a state, the sinner is theologically separated from God because the union through grace has been broken. Nevertheless, on the psychological side, God seems to be most intimate and near. Does it not seem to be the explanation of many of Greene's sinners that they are theologically remote from God and yet that God is psychologically very present to them in their strivings and movements of love toward Him? Does this not offer some plausible explanation for the self-condemnatory, indelible, and incommunicable properties of sin that are strangely associated with the struggle to love God?

It seems to me that this paradox is at the heart of much of the conflict in Greene and that it is a sound principle of both theology and philosophy that when God is most theologically remote, He is most psychologically proximate to the sinner in the deepest reaches of his soul. One is inclined to push even this paradox to the fullest in the incident of Father Callifer's offering in *The Potting Shed*. God was psychologically present to Father Callifer in all of the sufferings he experienced through the twenty years following the suicide of his nephew, James. When the priest was most convinced of his hatred for God, God was most present to him. From correspondence with Mr. Graham Greene and after seeing the play three times, twice in his company, I have shed most of my doubts that this is the meaning of the play. Granted that Father Callifer had sinned in some way, he had never really lost God in a genuine loss of faith. Sins can be grave without a concomitant loss of the theological virtue of faith, and it would seem that Father Callifer did not lose the theological virtue of faith from the experience with his nephew in the potting shed. He offered what he loved most, and at the moment of that offering it was not clear in his mind what he did love most. This would explain his hesitation when he recalls the occasion, or rather when in fact he does not recall it, because it is James who puts the words in the priest's mouth some twenty years later.

Even if it be granted that Father Callifer experienced a genuine loss of the theological virtue of faith, the paradoxical principle enunciated above would still have an application. If Father Callifer had lost all supernatural life (including the theological virtue of faith) by what some would find to be a public statement of strict heresy, the principle would still be appropriate that although God was theologically remote from his soul, He was through the twenty years of self-condemnation most proximate to his soul psychologically. To accept the first hypothesis—that there has been no genuine loss of faith—is to accept some more plausible explanation for the intimacy of this presence in psychologico-moral experience through the operation of actual graces in conjunction with the minimal supernatural life of the theological virtue of faith.

Maritain refers to the new atheism as only an apparent flight from God and an implicit acknowledgment of His omnipresence. This is another way of stating the principle that God can be theologically remote from us through sin and the privation of sanctifying grace, and yet can be so intimately present to our souls in the psychologico-moral experience of guilt which is always self-condemnatory, indelible, and incommunicable.

There is another theological principle that appears to be applicable in the novels of Greene. This principle has been suggested in a projected application from readings in Father Leen's works and in the writings of Maritain. It is a proposition in theology that grave sin brings with it eternal punishment of sense and of loss of God, should the sinner die unrepentant. Father Leen in one of his books develops the familiar idea of sanctifying grace being the inchoation of the beatific vision (*visio Dei beatifica inchoativa*) and also being the fountain springing up into eternal life (*fons saliens in vitam aeternam*). The point he wishes to make is that no Catholic should be unhappy if he is in the state of grace, because he possesses in his soul the inchoation of the beatific vision, and of the same life that he will have in heaven.

May we not simply take the converse of this reasoning and argue that the sinner in his present privation of sanctifying grace is experiencing in his psychologico-moral state of separation from God something comparable to the pain of loss (*poena damni*)? Would this suggest some foundation, theologically and philosophically, for the inner tragic experiences of Major Scobie and both Maurice and Sarah? Does it offer any reasonable explanation for some of the words of James Callifer in *The Potting Shed*: "He's in my lungs like air", "Then God comes back like memory"—and for some of the colloquies included in the diary of Sarah in *The End of the Affair*? This principle seems to offer some possible insight into the

characters of Greene's novels and plays: just as a person in the state of grace has within his soul the beginnings of eternal life and should therefore be supernaturally happy, so the person in the state of sin has been deprived of sanctifying grace and is experiencing in his psychologico-moral state of separation from God some of the terrifying reality of the pain of loss. I leave to more competent critics the task of testing the validity of the principle in the long catalogue of Greene's novels.

There is another situation in Greene's works that causes some difficulty for the philosopher-theologian. In "Visit to Morin," published in *Harper's Bazaar* of January, 1957, Pierre Morin, the author of *Le Diable au Ciel* and *Le Bien Pensant*, becomes the centre for a curious speculation on the nature of faith. Dunlop, a buyer and seller of wine, comes to visit Morin on Christmas Eve. Dunlop, himself a non-Catholic, had some experience with the faith through a conversation with a Catholic chaplain who had lent him two books—"one a penny catechism with its catalogue of preposterous questions and answers, smug and explanatory: mystery like a butterfly killed by cyanide, stiffened and laid out with pins and paper strips." In the course of the conversation with Morin, Dunlop is advised to avoid theology if he would want to believe: "A man can accept anything to do with God until scholars begin to go into the details and the implications. A man can accept the Trinity, but the arguments that follow . . ." Dunlop is asked by Morin: "Can you find anything more inadequate than the Scholastic arguments for the existence of God?" . . . "I used to get letters saying how I had converted them by this book or that. Long after I had ceased to believe myself I was a carrier of belief, like a man can be a carrier of disease without being sick."

Through this complex analysis of the relation between faith and belief, one wonders whether Morin means by *faith* the supernatural theological virtue of faith and by *belief* the series of rational propositions that provide the plausible arguments for strictly theological propositions. Is Greene attempting to say, what no theologian would question, that the theological virtue of faith is compatible with some ignorance and scepticism concerning the rational arguments for the existence of God? In other words, is he saying that a man can have consummate theological faith and, at the same time, some subjective doubts about the rational arguments in apologetics? Conversely, is he saying that a man can rationally accept all reasoned arguments for God's existence and still be without faith? No one would quarrel with him on the possibility of finding a person who accepts the rational arguments for the existence of God and still is without the theological, supernatural, gratuitous gift of faith. Priests and laymen have confronted many souls of this kind, and their prayer to God is that He grant the *illuminatio intellectus et impulsio voluntatis* that will bring

them on the way to Christ's Church. The paradox of the man of reason who rationally accepts God but does not have theological faith has another side to it. It is equally true that a person with the theological virtue of faith can still find difficulties and growing dissatisfaction with some rational arguments for the existence of God while never questioning the fact of the radical capacity of the mind to know that God *IS*. Such an individual avoids Fideism by admitting the power of the mind to know God exists, but his discontent is with the arguments that have been used by so many philosophers. Certainly the Church has never canonized the immanent cogency of any of the arguments for the existence of God or declared that a specific argument compels intellectual assent by *every* intellect. Admittedly, the person who would sceptically question *every* rational argument while still insisting that he accepts the validity of the human mind to prove the existence of God, might be pouring too much acid on the efforts of the mind and be left with a faculty that will *never* be convinced. If it is Greene's position that theological faith and some rational disbelief (in the sense of dissatisfaction with rational arguments) can operate as polarities in the soul, and if he is illustrating that point in *The Potting Shed* and elsewhere in his novels, we would agree that he is on secure ground.

Nevertheless, the principle of the compatibility of theological faith and rational disbelief (in the sense of dissatisfaction with rational arguments) may not be pushed too far. It provides an explanation of faith and belief in Greene's works and of much of the paradoxical cerebrations by Greene's characters. Possibly this distinction between theological faith and rational belief, if made by the Reverend Mother in the convent school where lived the precocious young lady of Mary McCarthy's short story, would have put an end to the bewilderment and consternation caused by her protests that she had lost her faith because she would not accept the five arguments for the existence of God from St. Thomas. The Reverend Mother might have insisted upon the compatibility of theological faith with a scorn for rational arguments, adding that this young lady (Miss McCarthy?) had not necessarily lost her faith simply because Thomistic natural theology was not compelling to her sceptical mind. Had the Reverend Mother insisted upon the distinction and had Miss McCarthy realized it herself, she would have been without a short story that still baffles many readers.

I have drawn upon three principles that seem to me to explain somewhat the enigmas and mysteries in Greene. I suggest that they are defensible principles for Greene to employ and that they serve to clarify and illuminate some of the paradoxical behaviour of his leading characters. The three principles are at the root of

the conflicts established by Greene and make intelligible his treatment of the problems of guilt and of sin.

There remains one more observation to make in the interpretation of the conflicts found in his novels and plays. There is a remarkable twist of the pact between Sarah and God in *The End of the Affair* and between Father Callifer and God in *The Potting Shed*. In the first pact, Sarah comes upon what she considers to be the dead body of Maurice and says in effect—"If You let him live, I will believe", which she hastily changes to: "If You let him live, I will give him up"—because she argues that belief is easy and that by merely saying one believes, by that very statement, he does believe. In *The Potting Shed* there is a reversal of the terms of the pact, and now Father Callifer says (to paraphrase once again), "If You let him live, You may take away what I love most." It is James, the nephew, who alters these words of the pact to identify faith with what Father Callifer loved most. Mr. Greene does not make it as simple for us as he does for James to make this identification; and to keep the pact on secure theological foundations, so that it be not jerrybuilt, it is wise not to make this identification. The tantalizing feature of Greene is that we still wonder whether Father Callifer himself made this identification, just as we still wonder about Scobie's act of contrition.

It is suggested, therefore, that there are significant twists and inversions in the characters and themes of Greene's novels and plays, and that these twists and inversions pivot around the same radical conflicts regarding the problem and the mystery of sin. These, then, are the four points suggested for further discussion on Greene's mastery of conflict: (1) Greene uses frequently the paradoxical principle that God appears to be psychologically most present when theologically He is most remote; (2) just as a person in the state of grace has within his soul the beginnings of eternal life and should therefore be supernaturally happy, so the sinner in the state of theological separation from God is experiencing, in his psychological-moral condition of guilt and sin, some of the terrifying reality of the pain of loss; (3) there is a compatibility between theological faith and rational disbelief (in the sense of dissatisfaction with rational arguments), but it cannot be pushed too far—possibly Greene does, on occasion, push this principle too far; (4) there are significant twists in the themes and characterizations of Greene which centre around the fundamental conflicts involved in the problem and the mystery of sin.